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THE GREEN YU-LIN OF SHENSI PROVINCE

- COMMUNIST CHINA -

by Chiang Ku-hsien

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THE GREEN YU-LIN OF SHENSI PROVINCE

- COMMUNIST CHINA -

Following is a translation of an article by Chiang Ku-hsien in the Chinese-language periodical Lu-hsing-chia, Peiping, No. 4, 18 April 1960, page 8-10.

Within the special district of Yu-Lin in Shensi Province lies a vast expanse of desert. Whenever the quicksands move southward, they swallow countless acres of farm and pasturable lands, towns and villages, and seriously endanger the security of lives and properties. But since the liberation ten years ago, the heroic people of Yu-Lin have gradually planted a green belt of protective forest on this once barren land. They have also built irrigation dikes in their attempt to transform thousands of acres of desert into fertile fields.

The New Look at Yu-Lin

Yu-Lin has been historically a town of great strategic importance on this frontier of the steppes. This locality once served as a battle-ground, where often bloody campaigns were waged amidst sound and fury. During the rule of the Kuomintang reactionaries, darkness enveloped Yu-Lin; houses of prostitution and opium dens could be seen everywhere. The "pioneer merchants" used to cheat the wealth of the Mongols with varnished or adulterated goods.

After a ten-years' reconstruction since the liberation, the face of Yu-Lin has changed.

From the local headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party in the more elevated northern section of Yu-Lin, the entire town comes into perspective: green-tiled houses, neat streets, luxuriant trees, and green ponds - scenes that remind one of towns in south China. If one walks past the Pagoda of a Thousand Buddhas on the main street and turns into a southward alley, he will come face to face with rows and rows of workshops in a notched pattern. These represent the textile industry of Yu-Lin, whose chief product--the Yu-Lin woolen blankets--is in heavy demand in both domestic and foreign markets on account of its excellent quality and exquisite design. In the southwestern corner of the town, stands a newly finished structure - the Yu-Lin rug factory which presents a contrasting view of the textile factories in the distance. Other factories have arisen here and there: a cement factory, an agricultural implements factory, and a power plant, for example. But the

most surprising and inspiring achievement is the service of running water provided by water depots for every part of the town.

Along the "Great Wall in Green"

Under the threat of sandstorms, the town of Yu-Lin had been "on the move" three times in the past. If one climbs up the rampart in the northeastern corner of the old town, one can see remnants of the Great Wall, standing amidst the vast yellow sands. Yet, besides this sandburied section of the town, a belt of green forest is flourishing.

Under the leadership of the Party and the government, several hundreds of thousands of people have in the last ten years undertaken the reforestation program to make the desert green. They have planted various species of trees in some seven million mou of desert. These trees, which form a protective forest belt of 600 kilometers in length, are protecting farm and pasturable lands as well as putting a stop to the southward advance of the desert. As one penetrates the desert along this "Great Wall in Green," one can see various exotic plants rarely seen elsewhere. These plants have strong vitality for survival. While the desert becomes the scene of terrific dust-storms, these plants can live on harmlessly. There is a special kind of desert bamboo that flourishes in this desert. The stalks of this bamboo above the sand surface often reach several tens of meters. On every meter of the stalk, there are about ten nodes, each of which has flimsy hair-like roots. Thus this plant can adapt to the desert environment and withstand the violent winds and sand movements. The desert wormwood is another plant of strong fiber. It is shaped like a broom and has the ability to penetrate 20-30 feet into the sand and thus can survive indefinitely. When other plants wilt during the dry season, the desert wormwood thrives. In some five years after the planting of its seeds, the wormwood is capable of spreading over two mou of desert with a thick layer of crust. The white seeds of wormwood are even edible and they provide rich ingredients to the diet. A mixture of bean flour and the flour from wormwood seeds makes noodles of pastry-like thinness. I have tasted this kind of noodles: they are simply delicious. The most important shrub of the desert is the desert willow. If quicksands should swallow up one willow, there would be ten willows appearing to avenge it. Actually, they grow just a little above the sands of the desert. Another plant, the desert mustard, is even more peculiar in its growth: it always grows alone on top of the sand dunes. Other plants, such as lemon balms, dates, and locusts, have also strong vitality in experiencing sandstorms.

After admiring these exotic plants, I came to the green-hued show-place of the desert--Hai-Liu Tan. Appearing like a green fortress along this "Great Wall in Green," she is enshrouded by thick woods, whose verdent green hides her from the sun.

Everywhere the great earth is decorated with wild but exquisite flowers along the paths and around the trees. As one comes to this spot from the intense heat of the desert, one would immediately feel the heat gone and in its place, a soft breeze. The heroic people of Hai-Liu Tan have with their own hands conquered the desert. As result of the extensive reforestation program, threes are gradually reclaiming over 70% of the land surface in this area, thus reaching the level achieved by the program as a whole. With the solidifying of the quicksands and the improvement of the soil, the food production has tripled - thus raising the standard of living for the farmers. The "Great Wall in Green" has exerted a terrific impact.

The Desert "Canal"--the Yu-Tung Dike

Within that seemingly limitless desert, the wind produces the shrill sound of thousands of on-rushing horses. Yet, there exist flowing waters of ten feet in width, meandering like flood-dragons through the desert. Scintillating proudly in the distance is the famous Yu-Tung Dike, also called by the triumphant inhabitants of Yu-Lin as the "Desert Canal."

With creative spirit and pioneer heroism, the people of Yu-Lin began in the spring of 1958 their assault on the desert. Under the guidance of the Party and the government, the participating farmers thoroughly applied their native intelligence and inexhaustible determination in overcoming the innumerable difficulties and dangers. By devising successful methods in the technical aspects of dike construction, they finally succeeded in leading the waters of the tributary of the Wu-Tin River, the Yu-Ch'i River, from Hung-Ho Liang across the desert for a distance of 140 kilometers.

In August 1959, having travelled a long distance across the desert, I came to the locality of Yu-Tung Dike and saw the inspiring scene of a "water-leading and sand-dragging" operation. This is a device by means of which the laborers can employ hydraulic power to dig and to overspread the sand. About two hundred farmers would first build a dam upstream, dig out a dike that leads to the sand depository, and then open up the dam. As the flow of water inundates the hilly sand dune, it carries the sands to where they would find rest. In a little while, as the water seeps under the sands, an extensive stretch of even sandy ground makes its appearance. Using the "water-leading and sand-dragging" operation, these 200 farmers achieved in one hour the work that normally would take 3000 people a whole day to finish.

After the intake of water, the desert has become more tractable. In the changed landscape, vast tracts of desert have become fertile farm lands, on which grow abundant crops. All along the two sides of the dike appear thousands of grape-like clusters of

small ponds one after another; sand dunes appear as islands standing in the middle of these ponds, which are crystal clear to their very bottom. In some of the 20 larger ponds, there exist already some 400,000 fish. The terns and wild geese constantly fly over the water surface, where even the swans also have come to rest. Those small animals which in the past derived their name, the "desert hermits," from their lonely existence now have new companions.

The Fish Ponds of the Desert

To the laymen, the desert is always a stretch of yellow sand, where no grasses grow. To these people, the existence of natural lakes in such a locality seems inconceivable. Yet, in the middle of this vast desert along the boundary of the Great Wall of northern Shensi, there are scattered over 200 big and small natural "sand-seas" (or lakes). At Shên-Mu, Yu-Lin, Ching-Pien, there are about 90 lakes suitable for fish-breeding, with a total area of roughly 100,000 mou. Most of these lakes already have numerous species of fish.

From Yu-Lin, I rode on a bus belonging to the Shên-Mu Mine Works and arrived at the shore of the Hung-Yen-Nao Lake. This natural lake, situated on the Yu-Lin--Cha Banner highway within the Shên-Mu county, has an area of over 50,000 mou. Reaching a depth of over 200 feet, its waters resemble the green waves of an ocean; whenever the wind blows across the lake, one can see the moving spectacle of the "Green Waves of the Gobi Desert." If one should want to walk around the shore of the lake to enjoy the view fully, he will not be able to cover the entire circumference in a day's time! Also the salt content of the water makes the lake an excellent habitat for fish.

The once sleeping lake has finally awoken. In August 1958, the Yu-Lin Special District set up here the first fish-breeding ground in the desert. Thus began the work of the Shên-Mu Hung-Yen Nao Fishery Ground to breed and catch fish. In a year's time, the catch yielded over 100,000 catties of fish, which supplied not only the local demand, but also the market needs of Inner Mongolia, Yu-Lin, and other places.

In the summer, the workers of this fishery ground can be seen hauling fish on the calm lake surface. The maximum yield per day often reaches several thousand catties. According to the local inhabitants, the lake from time to time gives forth fish of several hundreds of catties in weight. Here on the lake also live wild ducks, whose eggs can often be found along the shores.

In the winter, the lake presents another appearance. After ice had formed on the lake surface, the fishery workers dig holes into the ice to catch the fish beneath. They set up lamps throughout the night during their catching operation. As the lamps reflect

the shadow of men on this lake, the scenery takes on an even more beautiful character.

There are many other lakes that contain vast reserves of fishery products, such as the Kung-Po Lake of Shên-Mu County, the Tao-T'u Lake and Yueh-Ya Lake of Yu-Lin County, and the lakes of Ching-Pien and Ting-Pien Counties. Once fishery grounds are built on these lakes, more people will enjoy the fresh fish coming from the desert belt of Shensi. As the surrounding land of the lakes comes under improvement, the resulting farm and pasturable land would support a mixed economy of sheep, chickens, and ducks, complete with forestry and fishery.

South China in the Steppes--the Ting-Ch'i Farm

As result of the heroic struggles of the people of Yu-Lin, vast tracts of forest land made their appearance in the middle of the desert. People proudly compare this area as the "South China of the steppes." The Ting-Ch'i Farm (now converted into an experiment station of the Yu-Ho Pao Farm) is one such spot. On the day before I was to leave Yu-Lin, I made a special visit to this farm.

After the bus arrived at the Yu-Ho Pao station on the southward journey from Yu-Lin, several miles of walk on a sandy road and across the Yu-Ch'i River took me to the Ting-Ch'i Farm. Looking from elevated ground, one can see broad roads, straight dikes, thick trees along these dikes, and finally in the rectangular paddies of flooded fields glossy green rice, whose deep-set ears of grain stand forward like tails of weasels. All these lose nothing in comparison with the beautiful landscape of South China.

The workers of this farm have also boosted the wheat production. One mou of average soil can yield more than 300 catties of wheat; on the other hand, one mou of rich soil yields as much as over 600 catties. What difference is there between these statistics and those obtained in the fertile Szechwan valley!

Simultaneous with the development of farming, cattle raising and fishery also expanded. The ranch contains various domestic animals, but also a fruit orchard of several hundred mou, where apples and grapes are germinating. After a few years if I should come here again, I would be eating the fresh fruits of the desert. Near the orchard are the green-colored fish ponds. As evening approaches, flocks of sheep graze on the grasses. Near the ponds and dikes, one hears the croaking sounds of the frogs. When the sun rises on the eastern horizon, illuminating the sky like a scarlet fire, the green trees also reflect some of the red glow. This then is the landscape on the steppes of Inner Mongolia; this is a replica of the rural setting of South China!